

# Collision course

Genesis Centre CEO aiming for innovation through interaction

**M**ichelle Simms sits back and gestures around the crowded grad students' pub at Memorial University. "The Genesis Centre is much like here," she says. "It has a vibe, an energy you feel when you walk in the door." As it turns out, Bitters is an ideal place to meet for a burger and a chat — conveniently located and, yes, buzzing.

Simms is the new president and CEO of the Genesis Centre, located a stone's throw away on campus. "The Centre is a dynamic place to work ... the technology coming out of it is exciting, the people are passionate. Being able to go back and lead the Centre forward is also exciting. I have some pretty big plans."

Simms started as a business analyst with the Genesis Centre, a St. John's-based business incubator for technology start-ups, in 2002. Five years later, she became program manager. In 2015, she took on the job of vice-president of programs and operations. And then, in June 2016, she left.

"I was looking for something more, different," she says, smiling. She joined the Business Development Bank of Canada. "Greg Hood was in charge of the Centre and it was moving in a really good direction."

But then Hood landed a job at home in Ontario, and Simms began serious discussions about stepping into his shoes. After three weeks with BDC — just three weeks after her farewell party — she returned to the Genesis Centre as president, armed with an ambitious plan to make it bigger and better.

She began piecing together her vision earlier this year, during a tour of 17 business and technology incubators in Silicon Valley and Toronto. "I came back and looked at our Centre through a new lens: this is how things operate in other centres where technology, incubation, and innovation are thriving and, in some places, leading economic growth." Ultimately, that's the position Simms wants the Genesis Centre to occupy.

Her first step was to open up the Centre's

physical space to encourage interaction, collaboration, and idea-sharing.

"I really wanted to change the culture," she muses. "It is exciting, but it's all offices. We have an open-door policy, but my role now is pulling people out of those offices and making collision points within the Centre so they can learn from each other and engage with each other."

Simms can't literally tear down walls (the Centre is moving in a couple of years) so she's experimenting with moving furniture, holding events in the open central areas, and putting up white boards just about everywhere. Achievements are noted on a "shout out wall" so everyone knows about each others' successes. "We're making the Centre feel like everyone owns it," she says. The new Centre will be off-campus, in the old Battery hotel overlooking St. John's harbour, and will be very open concept.

She's also taking a new approach to programming. "We're 19 years old, but I'm looking at the Centre as a start-up. How can we scale Genesis, how can we grow it? Right now we have 11 companies in-house. What do I need to do to get it to 20? To get it to 30?"

Simms hints at program announcements coming later this year, as well as even greater engagement with the local, regional, and national business community. She says the Genesis Centre is already renowned for its success rate — a number that's hard to pinpoint but, of 40 companies who have "graduated," over 70 per cent are still thriving, including well-known examples Rutter and Verafin.

"We have a long history of being a successful incubator," Simms says. "I don't think we need big changes in that way, but we need a bigger presence, to serve more entrepreneurs. We do have an opportunity to play a bigger role in the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador." There's another meeting. She's already late.



## Business in her blood

Simms is a "third-generation entrepreneurial-minded person": her grandfather and parents have operated a number of businesses in her hometown of St. Anthony.

## The importance of the university ...

"I bring my kids [ages 4 and 8] into the office a lot. I want to expose them to the university ... to make sure they understand the importance of education, and how important the university is for me, and for our province."

## ... and of entrepreneurship

"We need to talk to our kids at a really young age about business and entrepreneurship ... whatever their career paths are, they may very well need business skills in that discipline."

## Advice to budding entrepreneurs

"If you feel that fire in your belly, go for it! Just make sure you engage with those around you, be it your family, friends, advisors, or customers. Don't build in a vacuum or you'll risk losing them all."

